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President Ernesto Zedillo Orders Arrest Of Zapatista Leaders

by LADB Staff

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On Feb. 9, President Ernesto Zedillo issued arrest warrants for five leaders of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Chiapas, including the group's prominent spokesman "Subcommander Marcos." The arrest orders ushered in a new army offensive in Chiapas to militarily wipe out the guerrillas, marking an abrupt end to the cease-fire that had remained in effect since January 1994. Now, a tense military lull grips the zone, since Zedillo has temporarily ordered the army to halt offensive action to allow one more chance for peace negotiations. Speaking on national television, Zedillo said the arrest orders were justified because federal agents had uncovered a conspiracy by the EZLN to "engage in new and greater violent acts, not only in Chiapas, but also in other parts of the country." He said federal authorities had confiscated weapons caches near Mexico City and Veracruz, which he said the rebels were going to use for attacks on federal facilities.

"In order to protect the population, to stop further violations of the law, and new violent actions by the EZLN, the government must immediately assume its constitutional duties to guarantee the security of Mexicans and maintain social peace," Zedillo said in his speech. In announcing the initiative, Zedillo identified Subcommander Marcos as Rafael Sebastian Guillen Vicente, a former university professor and son of a well-to-do businessman from Tamaulipas state. During public appearances since the uprising of the EZLN on Jan. 1, 1994, Marcos has worn a ski mask to hide his true identity. Despite Zedillo's claim, there appears to be strong public skepticism that Guillen is indeed Marcos. The daily newspaper Reforma, which conducted an informal survey of 400 residents of Mexico City, found that roughly 50% of the respondents doubted that Guillen is Marcos.

Additionally, almost 59% of those responding to the poll said they considered Marcos a "leader" and not an "outlaw," as claimed by President Zedillo when he ordered the arrest. Nevertheless, to follow through on his order for the arrest of EZLN leaders, Zedillo immediately sent federal soldiers to Chiapas to seek out Marcos and other leaders. As of Feb. 14, federal troops had moved deep into Zapatista territory, capturing the town of Guadalupe Tepeyac, which was one of the key bases for the EZLN. During the sweep, the army arrested one alleged EZLN leader, whom they identified as Jorge Javier Elorreaga, or "Subcomandante Vicente." The Zapatistas, meantime, did not resist the army incursions, and instead chose to move deeper into the Lacandon jungle. The Zapatistas, however, did not retreat quietly. In a communique issued on Feb. 11, the EZLN accused the government troops of committing human rights abuses, including air bombardment of four areas near the towns of Morelia and La Garrucha.

The EZLN statement said thousands of civilians had been forced to flee their homes after the army dispatched its troops. The army mobilization was backed by helicopters, with ground support from small tanks. The Interior Secretariat (SG) and the Attorney General's Office (PGR) immediately issued statements denying the Zapatista claims of bombings of Morelia and Garrucha. A PGR statement said the government's pursuit of rebel leaders was being done "legally and with strict

respect for human rights." For his part, Marcos in a public statement issued late on Feb. 12 denied that he was Guillen. He also said that the US had pushed Zedillo to act in Chiapas. According to Marcos, the US had demanded strong action against the Zapatistas as a central condition for US efforts to garner US\$50 billion in financial assistance to bail Mexico out of the economic crisis brought on by the peso devaluation (see SourceMex, 02/01/95).

Earlier, in a Feb. 10 interview with La Jornada daily newspaper, Marcos had warned the Zedillo administration that the troop incursion could rapidly deteriorate into a bloody war. "What follows, if no one stops it, is total guerrilla war," said Marcos. Notwithstanding Marcos's statements, a separate rebel communique hinted that the EZLN was still open to talks with the government if the Zedillo administration agreed to cancel the arrest order for Marcos and other Zapatista leaders. "We reiterate our readiness for dialogue and to find a political solution to this problem, but on condition that the pressure on Subcommander Marcos be called off," the EZLN said. The troop incursions into Chiapas and the orders to arrest Marcos and other EZLN leaders drew a massive protest from EZLN supporters in Mexico City. According to some estimates, more than 100,000 people filled Mexico City's Zocalo Square on Feb. 11 to demand an end to army intervention in Chiapas and a negotiated solution to the conflict.

Partly in response to public opinion against the operation, on Feb. 14, Zedillo ordered troops to suspend their military offensive in Chiapas in their pursuit of EZLN leaders, although he stopped short of ordering the withdrawal of soldiers from the state. In issuing the directive, Zedillo called on the federal army to restrict its actions to routine patrols and urged the EZLN leadership to make clear its negotiating position so that a "fair, honorable and final solution" could be reached. Meanwhile, debate is growing over the reasons why President Zedillo ordered the military action in the first place. Many political and economic analysts agree with Subcommander Marcos that Zedillo's decision to go after EZLN leaders may have indeed been the result of pressure from multilateral institutions and the US government to resolve the situation in Chiapas, which has left foreigners reluctant to continue investing in Mexico. At the same time, there is strong concern that Zedillo's actions could worsen, rather than improve, the political and economic climate in Mexico.

"I think he is taking a really big gamble, this could go horribly wrong," one diplomat told Reuters. On a related matter, on Feb. 14 Chiapas Governor Roberto Robledo Rincon announced his resignation. Robledo who had assumed office on Dec. 8, 1994 insisted that his decision was based on a "personal conviction" and not on pressure from either the PRI or the PRD. He expressed hope his decision would contribute to the peace process in Chiapas. As one of the conditions for negotiations, the EZLN had demanded that Robledo resign and that Amado Avendano the PRD's candidate for the Chiapas governorship be allowed to assume the position. Nevertheless, to replace Robledo as interim governor, the Chiapas legislature has nominated Julio Cesar Ruiz, also a member of the PRI and a representative in the federal Chamber of Deputies. Avendano, while not nominated to assume the gubernatorial post, will probably represent the PRD whenever new elections to replace Robledo are scheduled. There was no immediate reaction from the EZLN regarding Robledo's decision to step down, but Avendano told reporters that the resignation was only one step in bringing peace back to Chiapas. According to Avendano, for example, federal troops must withdraw from Chiapas as a prerequisite for peace. (Sources: Excelsior, 02/10/95; United Press International, 02/10/95, 02/12/95; El Universal, La Jornada, 02/10/95, 02/13/95; Spanish news service EFE, 02/09/95, 02/14/95;

Reuter, 02/09/95, 02/11/95; 02/12/95, 02/14/95; Associated Press, 02/11/95, 02/12/95, 02/14/95; Notimex, 02/12/95, 02/14/95; Deutsche Press Agentur, 02/14/95)

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